

February Celebration 2013.5

Remarks by President Ronald Liebowitz

February 1, 2014

Mead Chapel

Good morning. It's a pleasure to welcome you to this celebration of the class of 2013.5. I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you, the graduates, as you make your way from college to the next phase of your life.

Whatever that next phase may be, each and every one of you should feel a sense of great accomplishment for all you have achieved while here at Middlebury. You should also carry with you great confidence because your time here has prepared you well to meet the many challenges these dynamic times have already presented to your generation.

To the surprise of nobody here today, especially the parents and grandparents, this Feb class has accomplished an enormous amount and contributed so much to the College community during the four or so years it has been here. I want to provide a sampling of the things members of this Feb Class did, noting it is only a brief sketch of the larger picture.

First, in terms of the group's demographics: there are 126 seniors in today's celebrating class: 70 women and 56 men. Eighty-eight of you

began your college careers here as Febs, while 38 of you began in September but then timed your studies, perhaps intentionally, to become Febs and members of this talented group today.

The most popular majors for the class were Economics and Environmental Studies—15 of you majored in each.

One hundred ten [110], or 88 percent, of the class studied a language other than English, and almost half the class, 58 members, spent at least a semester studying abroad.

New York, with 16 graduates, is the most-represented state in the class, followed by Massachusetts with 15, and 16 of you are international students, representing 11 different countries. Each of you came to Middlebury with the potential, determination, and encouragement to make the most of your years here, and your achievements reflect the results of your hard work.

One member of the class won the extremely competitive Harry S. Truman Scholarship for graduate study in public affairs and public service.

Forty of you were active participants in the Programs on Creativity and Innovation, including 16 who were in residence at the Old Stone Mill pursuing independent projects. One of you used the space to develop iPhone and iPad applications, while another co-founded a software company dedicated to revolutionizing mobile geography and location-based data collecting.

Five of you were recipients of MiddChallenge grants in the arts, business, education, outreach, or policy. Two of you developed a program that collects the excess food that is prepared in the College's dining halls and then makes it available to local people in need. One of you used the grant to start a specialty-food business based on your grandmother's recipe. And two more used MiddChallenge grants to compile narratives from victims of bullying to understand and address the root causes of such behavior.

One of you received a Davis Projects for Peace grant to document stories of war veterans across the country, and another member of the class raised funds to support a non-profit educational foundation to provide scholarships to women in Zambia.

Community engagement was high on your list of priorities: many of you served as DREAM mentors, Community Friends, Page 1 Literacy volunteers, Habitat for Humanity workers, orientation leaders, and GlobeMed volunteers.

Nine Febs participated in a Middlebury Alternative Spring Break trips, helping others; three were Shepherd Poverty interns; two members of the class were instrumental in the recovery efforts following Hurricane Irene; and one was co-chair of the Volunteer Services Organization, which introduces Middlebury students to community engagement opportunities.

Members of this class devoted time to initiatives in the Congo and Uganda; one senior interviewed political dissidents in Moscow during Winter Term; and one participated in a research trip to Trinidad and Tobago and danced at the Carnival Performance Institute there.

Five members of this Feb class were involved in the design, communications, and construction of "InSite" – the College's 2013 Solar Decathlon home that finished eighth in the Department of Energy's international competition and will soon become a demonstration solar residence on the edge of campus.

The Class of 2013.5 has left a lasting mark in athletics, too. Eleven of you were members of varsity athletics teams, including a two-time finalist for national small-college football player of the year. One of you played three years on the baseball team and was signed to a contract by the Baltimore Orioles organization. Seeing how Steve Hauschka, Midd class of 2007, will kick for the Seattle Seahawks in tomorrow's Super Bowl, we should not be surprised if our 2013.5 Feb graduate winds up pitching in a World Series before too long. No offense to any Orioles fans present, but I think he might need to be traded for that to happen. Maybe not.

There are also two varsity soccer players among you, in addition to two varsity basketball players, two skiers, and a softball player. And one of you ran both track and cross country. Many members of the class also participated in club sports and intramurals including a devoted group of seven rugby players whose team had an almost Cinderella run this past fall, winning its conference championship and hosting its first national playoff game in November.

Many members of this class earned College honors including the Interfaith Cooperation Award of the Charles P. Scott Center for Spiritual and Religious Life, two Public Service Leadership Awards, and the Outstanding Leader of a Student Organization Award.

Two seniors here today arrived on campus in 2010, noticed –and I would add *lamented loudly* -- the lack of a vibrant, live-music scene for students, and organized *Middlebury Music United* to encourage and support the performance of rock, pop, jazz, and blues on campus. Many other seniors have been active in organizing significant, new activities on campus like the storytelling events *The Moth and Cocoon*, the Communities and Justice Symposium, and StopTraffick, the organization devoted to ending human bondage.

A member of this Feb class entered the *Sleepless in Burlington* film competition and directed an original film, "Room for Rent," that won both Best Film and the festival's Audience Choice Award.

On the performing arts side, two of you were members of the cast of the Off-Broadway theatre company, PTP/NYC, and both were invited to participate in the Irene Ryan National Acting Competition at the American College Theatre Festival.

And also in this class is one of the founders of MiddBeat, that indispensable purveyor of information, news, and opinion on all things Middlebury, or, in its own words, and I quote directly from its webpage:

Everything and anything going on at Middlebury College. 100% student-created and student-generated. 0% affiliation with Middlebury College administration.

Although I get the point, I join many in thanking the creators of MiddBeat, believing that having more information and opinions out there makes for better discussion and engagement in the life of the College...I think!

As you might expect, all this is simply a smattering of all you as a class accomplished while here. Your achievements have so enriched the lives of our community, and we are enormously proud of you all. Congratulations!

Now, if you took a poll of Vermonters and asked which month they liked the least, the vast majority would choose February. As Joseph Wood Krutch, one of the great literary naturalists of the early 20th century, said, "The most serious charge which can be brought against New England is not Puritanism...but February."

February is the year's dark predawn—it's cold and quiet. But most of you came to Middlebury in February, which says something about your character. It suggests that you are optimists...maybe a little nonconformist...willing to take risks...eager, as poet Robert Frost wrote, "to take the road less traveled by."

Those are important characteristics that I think you share with your College. One thing that has characterized Middlebury since its founding 214 years ago is a willingness to do things differently...to innovate...to take a calculated risk in order to accomplish something extraordinary. A college that began as an experiment in an out-of-the-way farming settlement has developed into one of the leading liberal arts colleges in the country largely, because like you, it has done things a bit out of the ordinary.

As you leave Middlebury, it is fitting to ask yourself what it is you will remember most about your time here, and what part of your college experience will make the greatest difference in your life after Middlebury.

As a geographer, I would like to think it will be the place *itself*—the physical environment—that will exert the greatest and most durable influence on you. I agree with Wallace Stevens, who wrote: "*His soil is man's intelligence.*" And it is hard to argue with Stevens: we learn from our environment, and the places that teach us things that truly matter are carried in our hearts as well as our brains forever.

The natural beauty that surrounds us here is likely to be one of the things you will remember most about Middlebury. I am sure that many of you have experienced some unexpected moments of joy as you walked to class on one of those spectacular autumn days when the vibrant foliage on the mountains stands out sharply against the blue sky; or walking on that pristine white carpet across campus—or this year on top of some truly treacherous ice; or seeing the multiple shades of green that burst across the landscape in the spring—even if spring doesn't show itself until you are about to leave for summer break. And of course, there are the breath-taking views of both the Adirondacks and Green Mountains from the College's Snow Bowl...soon to be experienced in a slightly different way in just a few hours.

These simple things have inspired a sense of adventure and creativity in generations of students who have studied at Middlebury, along with enduring strong feelings of attachment. I hope you will take with you an appreciation of this corner of the natural world, now firmly rooted in your minds, wherever you go, along with the sense of wonder that it inspires.

Yet when one speaks of "place," one must include the human as well as the physical characteristics of that particular place when considering its overall impact on one's personal development and life.

And when you think back on your Middlebury years, I am sure you'll find that your memories of this place are, more than anything else, linked to its people—your friends, your professors, your teammates, your coaches, staff members, and your acquaintances in town.

Seated around you today are 125 fellow Febs, many of whom are very likely to be your friends for life. Through the years, they will

celebrate your achievements, reach out to you when you stumble, share your joys and disappointments, and always remain close to you.

Friendships like these, which began in the cold and bluster of a Middlebury February, are often intense, especially when they develop in a community that is small and relatively isolated, and where there are few distractions to compete for one's social and intellectual energies. Your four years here have helped you develop the kind of relationships that are hard to replicate in other environments. They have also given you an appreciation for the strength of community, which has shaped how you will relate to others throughout your lives: in a more caring and personal manner.

One of the great advantages of attending a small, residential College is the opportunity to work with faculty, staff, and even trustees outside the traditional classroom to make a difference in the life and direction of the institution. And many of you have done just that—on multiple projects, be it how to expand the purchasing of local foods; the adopting of sustainable building practices; installing a new biomass gasification facility; committing to be carbon neutral by the end of 2016; investing in a Solar Farm to test the feasibility of shifting more of our electricity needs to solar-based technologies; and now posing the very large question of how best to address the “knowns” and “unknowns” of climate change through how we conduct our business, including our investment practices. These ideas, all of them, have come largely from Middlebury students, and have required a deep dive into research rooted in the classroom, but then extending out to various offices on campus, and ultimately oftentimes including the board room with College’s trustees.

Beyond the benefits that accrue to the College for this kind of student involvement, these initiatives, and many others that involve student engagement, are the best examples of how a liberal arts education should work, and why a liberal arts education is the best preparation for life: students engage a broad range of subjects in a formal classroom setting, taught and mentored by an accomplished and committed faculty, and then they use what they learned to make a difference outside that classroom—not only here on campus, but in the town, the county, the state, and often times around the globe.

The greatest value of your liberal arts education is that it prepares you to live in a rapidly changing world that is likely to become more complex and less predictable in the coming years. It is an education that inspires one to continue to learn throughout one’s life, and teaches one how to appreciate the physical and artistic world we inhabit. The great American patriot and president, John Adams, who played many roles in his long life, said, *“There are two types of education, both crucial: one teaches us how to make a living, and the other how to live.”*

But learning how to live—how to be active and productive citizens and draw satisfaction from life itself, will be different for you than it was for your parents’ generation, and even different from those who sat where you are now sitting just a decade ago. The world has not only become flatter and also smaller...brought closer together through the lowering of political, social, financial, and cultural barriers; the competition for jobs or “work,” or as Bobo Sideli would put it, along with any other opportunity, is no longer determined by where people grow up, where they live, or what citizenship they hold. What is happening in China, Europe, and Latin America, or just about anywhere in the world, affects us in this country, even in rural Vermont, as much as what is going on in other parts of the United States.

You will soon be part of this world—a remarkably connected world in which the balance of economic and political power is shifting before our eyes. Each of you will have an opportunity to play an important role in our ever increasingly complex and evolving global society.

And though it is perhaps daunting to think about your next chapter, and how you will participate in all that is going on beyond the hills of Vermont, you should, as I noted earlier, take comfort in the fact that you are well prepared to jump in. Because of your strong liberal arts background and how that background has shaped the way you think and act, combined with your deep appreciation for the power of relationships and community that was honed right here, you are in a great position to make a real difference in whatever career you choose.

The best advice I might offer you as you begin your post-Middlebury lives, destined to become consequential players in solving the large challenges before you, is rooted in the lessons our faculty conveyed to you by example during the past four years: *learning is a life-long endeavor...it never ends.* Just as the professors with whom you studied learn more and more each year through their research and teaching, you, too, will learn more and more as you research your way through life’s long and challenging syllabus.

As you put your intelligence, creativity, optimism, and values to work for the common good, remember...*always remember...*to exercise humility. You may think you have all the right answers as you engage people from all walks of life because of all you have accomplished at such a young age. But make sure to leave significant mental space for the reality that you have lots more to learn, and indeed *will* learn so very much from the experiences that lie in front of you, from your future successes and failures, and, most importantly, from other people.

Your days as Middlebury students have come to an end, but may all that you have learned and experienced here serve you well throughout your lives. I hope the fond memories of your college days stay with you, and that your bond to this place will remain forever strong.

And most of all, we hope that over the course of your four years here, you have learned, in John Adams’ words, “how to make a living, and *how to live.*”

We wish you well, a great ski-down today, and we look forward to seeing you back on campus often.

Thank you.

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